

## How to Help: Talk with Teachers to Resolve Problems

### Helping Your Child With Homework

Homework problems often can be avoided when families and caregivers value, monitor and guide their children's work on assignments. Sometimes, however, helping in these ways is not enough. If you have problems, here are some suggestions for how to deal with them.

#### Tell the Teacher about Your Concerns

You may want to contact the teacher if:

- your child refuses to do her assignments, even though you've tried hard to get her to do them;
- the instructions are unclear;
- you can't seem to help your child get organized to finish the assignments;
- you can't provide needed supplies or materials;
- neither you nor your child can understand the purpose of the assignments;
- the assignments are too hard or too easy;
- the homework is assigned in uneven amounts—for instance, no homework is given on Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday, but on Thursday four assignments are made that are due the next day; or
- your child has missed school and needs to make up assignments.

In some cases, the school guidance counselor or principal also may be helpful in resolving problems.

#### Work with the Teacher

Continuing communication with teachers is very important in solving homework problems. As you work with your child's teacher, here are some important things to remember:

- **Talk with each of your child's teachers early in the school year.** Get acquainted before problems arise and let each teacher know that you want to be kept informed. Most elementary and middle schools hold regular parent-teacher conferences or open houses. If your child's school doesn't provide such opportunities, call the teacher to set up a meeting.

- **Contact the teacher as soon as you suspect your child has a homework problem** (as well as when you think he's having any major problems with his schoolwork). Schools have a responsibility to keep you informed about your child's performance and behavior and you have a right to be upset if you don't find out until report-card time that your child is having difficulties. On the other hand, you may figure out that a problem exists before the teacher does. By alerting the teacher, you can work together to solve a problem in its early stages.
- **Request a meeting with the teacher to discuss homework problems.** Tell him briefly why you want to meet. You might say, "Rachel is having trouble with her math homework. I'm worried about why she can't finish the problems and what we might do to help her." If English is your second language, you may need to make special arrangements, such as including in the meeting someone who is bilingual.
- **Approach the teacher with a cooperative spirit.** Believe that the teacher wants to help you and your child, even if you disagree about something. Don't go to the principal without giving the teacher a chance to work out the problem with you and your child.
- **Let the teacher know whether your child finds the assignments too hard or too easy.** (Teachers also like to know when their students are particularly excited about an assignment.) Of course, not all homework assignments can be expected to interest your child and be perfectly suited to her. Teachers just don't have time to tailor homework to the individual needs of each student. However, most teachers want to assign homework that their students can complete successfully and they welcome feedback.

Many teachers structure homework so that a wide range of students will find assignments interesting. For example:

- They offer students options for different approaches to the same topic or lesson;
  - They give extra assignments to students who want more challenge; and
  - They give specialized assignments to students who are having trouble in a particular area.
- **During your meeting with the teacher, explain what you think is going on.** In addition, tell the teacher if you don't know what the problem is. Sometimes a student's version of what's going on isn't the same as the teacher's version. For example, your child may tell you that the teacher never explains assignments so that he can understand them. But the teacher may tell you that your child isn't paying attention when assignments are given.
  - **Work out a way to solve or lessen the problem.** The strategy will depend on what the problem is, how severe it is and what the needs of your child are. For instance:
    - Is the homework often too hard? Maybe your child has fallen behind and will need extra help from the teacher or a tutor to catch up.
    - Does your child need to make up a lot of work because of absences? The first step might be working out a schedule with the teacher.
    - Does your child need extra support beyond what home and school can give her? Ask the teacher, school guidance counselor or principal if there are mentor programs in your community. Mentor programs pair a child with an adult volunteer who assists with the child's special needs.

Many schools, universities, community organizations, churches and businesses offer excellent mentoring programs.

- **Make sure that communication is clear.** Listen to the teacher and don't leave until you're sure that you understand what's being said. Make sure, too, that the teacher understands what you have to say. If, after the meeting, you realize you don't understand something, call the teacher to clarify.

At the end of the meeting, it may help to summarize what you've agreed to do: "OK, so to keep track of Kim's assignments, I'll check her assignment book each night and write my initials beside new assignments. Each day you'll check to make sure she's written down all new assignments in her book. That way we'll be certain that I know what her assignments are."

- **Follow up to make sure that the approach you agreed to is working.** If the teacher told you, for example, that your child needs to spend more time practicing long division, check back in a month to talk about your child's progress.

Homework can bring together children, families and teachers in a common effort to improve children's learning.

Helping your child with homework is an opportunity to improve your child's chances of doing well in school and life. By helping your child with homework, you can help him learn important lessons about discipline and responsibility. You can open up lines of communication—between you and your child and you and the school. You are in a unique position to help your child make connections between school, work and the "real world," and thereby bring meaning (and some enjoyment) to your child's homework experience.